

Making a meal of it

AT certain times one can readily predict what will appear in the papers. Over the Yuletide I eagerly awaited the seasonal article on how much it would cost to actually send a sweetheart all the presents from the *Twelve Days of Christmas* song. Like the embarrassing drunken uncle at a family party it duly arrived. I swore to myself that I wasn't going to tread a similar path and dish up lines about the telly being 'a turkey' and 'full of old stuffing', but like the aforementioned tipsy uncle groping his host's wife, I can't help myself.

For starters there was Channel 5's *What Makes Jeffrey Tick?*, a programme that brought Christmas cheer to every lawyer in the land, as it stated in no uncertain terms that Lord Archer was a psychopath! I am not a political animal, and have no personal feelings for or against the chap, but I felt it was a bit much to label him mentally ill on national telly, especially when he wasn't on hand to defend himself. This character assassination was given scientific credence by Professor Adrian Furnham (UCL) who described the criteria for diagnosing psychopaths, possibly without realising that his general comments were going to be used to describe a particular individual. Antisocial behaviour, charm, rudeness,

TELEVISION REVIEWED BY NICK NEAVE

lying, cheating, lack of remorse, and need for risk, were the characteristics listed (and glibly applied to Lord Archer) just as easily as they could be applied to us all at certain times of our lives. Such features were also described as being just the kind of attributes necessary for success as a politician, and no doubt for a TV producer as well.

A particularly foul-tasting main course served up from the shallow end of the TV programme gene pool was *Shafted* (ITV1). This morally challenged quiz show was dubbed 'psychological' largely because it was based on the 'Prisoner's Dilemma' of game theory fame. Trying desperately to out-nasty Anne Robinson, Robert Kilroy-Silk encouraged six poor unfortunates to 'shaft' one another by voting someone out at the end of each round. In the final the two remaining souls could either share the winnings or shaft again, the catch being that if both shafted they got nothing, but if one co-operated and the other shafted the 'shafter' would get the lot and the 'shaftee' nothing. I thought it was truly dire, but hate to admit that I was on the edge of my seat for the finale. I don't see this programme in the listings any more, but I fear its foul taste will linger for a long time.

Ah the dessert course! Something sweet to clear the palate. No chance. Once upon a time participants in real-life, camera-up-every-orifice, psychologically-probing-type programmes were referred to as 'housemates' or 'contestants'. The utter contempt with which TV-land views these wannabe's, was BBC1's woeful *Lab Rats*. Here four 'rats' (as they were called throughout this offensive tat) had various aspects of their personality and social behaviour intimately probed. A couple of embarrassed psychiatrists lurked around trying to pretend that this was worthy science, as some dull 'experiments' appeared to show very little. I won't bore you with the dreary outcome, and hope that this dross never darkens our screens again.

However I fear the worst, and when I turned to my trusty *Haiku Advice for Psychologists* I was not cheered up with the prophetic pearl of wisdom on page 43:

*When humble guest is called a rat
Beware!
Zimbardo will rise again.*

■ Dr Nick Neave is at the Division of Psychology, University of Northumbria, and is a member of the Society's Press Committee. E-mail: nick.neave@unn.ac.uk.

Faith, hope and £200 million a year

MAYBE Michael Argyle's article in the January issue of *The Psychologist* did the rounds of Broadcasting House, or maybe the New Year is a prompt to spiritual reflection. Either way, the crossover between psychology and religion was a prominent theme in January's radio offerings.

Appearing on Radio 3's *Faith and Science*, Professor Helen Haste (University of Bath) participated in a debate with scientists and engineers of various religious persuasions. Haste made the point that religions have in the past had a monopoly on 'wonder' and 'mystery'; modern secular scientists like Dawkins show wonder and mystery to be part of the human condition, often serving to fire scientific activity. Adopting a psychological perspective, Haste explained religion in

RADIO REVIEWED BY JON SUTTON

terms of a need to reduce uncertainty, and said that faith healing could be explained by the placebo effect.

A pretty lucrative placebo effect, it would seem. *The Miracle Men* (Radio 4, with our old friend Dr Raj Persaud) visited Lourdes, finding that faith-healing pilgrimages brought £200 million a year into the local economy. Not many leave 'officially' cured: an independent medical bureau set up in 1844 to verify claims demands that the ailment must have been acute, medically known, and organic, and a cure must be inexplicable by current treatment, lasting, and complete. The person must also realise they've been

cured, although to go all the way to Lourdes and then not have the decency to recognise that you'd been miraculously cured would seem a little churlish. Dr Denis Daley, part of the international medical team that spent 11 years (11 years!) investigating Jean-Pierre Bély's recovery from multiple sclerosis wasn't convinced, noting dryly that the real miracle of Lourdes is people's unshakeable faith in it. Professor Andrew Walker, a theologian, compared it to other 'leaps of faith', such as believing your wife really loves you. There's a research hypothesis in there, or maybe just a fairly sad domestic situation.

■ Dr Jon Sutton is Editor of *The Psychologist*.